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# Transnational and Decolonial Feminist Insights Into the Neoliberalization of Estonian Academia

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**Abstract:** Since the 1990s Estonia has been characterized by the acceptance of neoliberal values, as an antidote to the Soviet past. Neoliberal practices, like quantification and market-orientation, have permeated most spheres of society, including academia. There has been very little critical reflection on the epistemic inequalities created by this academic model for Estonia as a semi-peripheral country. In this article, the authors aim to place the neoliberalization of academia within a broader framework of colonial practices within global knowledge production, continuing their previous work on the blind spots of transnational feminism and intersections of feminisms and neoliberalism. Building on insights developed within transnational and decolonial feminism, the authors propose three interventions into neoliberal academic culture: telling better stories, practicing slow scholarship to tease apart complex colonial entanglements and using creative writing practices.

**Keywords:** neoliberalization; transnational feminism; decolonial feminism; Estonian scholarship

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## Introduction

The way the concept of “decoloniality” has recently been taken up by academics and activists marks a shift towards addressing the Euro-centric basis of knowledge production. However, since colonial legacies position various social groups and regions very differently, the call to decolonize Europe does not speak the same way to those situated in Western Europe, Eastern Europe or the multitude of “forgotten Europes” (Boatcă, 2019). The call for a reckoning with Europe’s colonial past thus also brings up contested notions of Europe and its ongoing colonial entanglements (Koobak & Tali, 2023), in its differently positioned margins which are variously implicated in historical and present-day injustices.

Estonia has had a complex colonial experience. The Northern Crusades in the 13th century initiated centuries-long German colonization (Pluskowski, 2019). Although what is now Estonian territory was conquered by Denmark, Poland, Sweden and Russia, power at the local level was wielded by Baltic-German nobility for over 700 years, with ethnic Estonian peasants excluded from positions of power. Estonia gained its independence in 1918, during the disintegration of the Russian empire.

After the Second World War, it was occupied by the Soviet Union and subjected to different settler colonial practices. The term applies to forms of colonialism in which

local populations are displaced or eradicated, to be replaced by colonists who seek to exploit the land and natural resources (Veracini, 2010).<sup>1</sup> As Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva (2023) have demonstrated, the Soviet Union's settler colonial practices included persecution and elimination of native cultures, labor and resource extraction and dispossession of native populations in parallel with the resettlement of ethnic Russians, resulting in racialized hierarchies. In the Estonian case ethnic Estonians were, for example, deported to Siberia and immigration of Russian-speaking people was encouraged, resulting in a notable shift in the demographic profile of the country. While in 1941 Estonians made up 94% of Estonia's population, by 1989 this figure had dropped to 65% (Kasekamp, 2010, pp. 154–155). The Russian-speaking community lost its former privileges after the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 when the previous colonizers found themselves in the role of a minority. This complex legacy makes the discussion of coloniality difficult, as the different colonial traces are layered and often in mutual tension. These also shape Estonia's relationship to the European project.

Since the 1990s Estonia has been invested in its "return to Europe" (Lauristin & Vihaelemm, 1997) which, however, is never quite achieved. Post-Soviet<sup>2</sup> states are consistently seen as "lagging behind" (Koobak, 2013; Koobak & Marling, 2014) and placed in the hierarchy of "degrees of Europeanness" as "epigonal Europe in the East" which is "not yet' modern" (Boatcă, 2020, p. 10). The postcolonial approach to the Baltic region has drawn attention to the interweaving of colonialism and imperialism in the Soviet period (Annus, 2016; Laanes, 2020). Soviet colonialism has found relatively little scholarly attention, although Gayatri Spivak already argued in 2003 that the terms "colonizer" and "colonized" can also be used for territories annexed by the Soviet Union (Collier et al., 2003). This topic has gained new urgency since the beginning of Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Looking at Europe's so-called transitional spaces, for whom Europeanness is always on the horizon but never achieved, offers new perspectives on the recent call to decolonize knowledge production. In this article, we will discuss the potentials of this approach for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) more broadly (cf. Țichindeleanu, 2013; Vilenica, 2023). A focus on Estonia allows us to investigate how current margins at the East of Europe are implicated in keeping up the colonial mode of power that still endures in Europe today, including in academia. In this we build on our previous research (Koobak & Marling, 2014; Marling & Koobak, 2017) and engage with the question of how decolonial approaches fit within the neoliberalization of academia. We will, specif-

1 A lengthier discussion of the use of the term "colonialism" for Baltic states under Soviet rule is provided by Annus (2012).

2 In our article, we use the term "post-Soviet" to refer to Estonia and other territories integrated into the Soviet Union, reserving "postsocialist" to CEE countries. In the Estonian case, the post-Soviet period has also been assertively postsocialist, in the emphatic desire to abandon socialist practices. We have addressed the limitations of this term that restricts the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union to a geographically limited area (Koobak & Marling, 2014). Others have addressed the orientalizing element of the term, as it tends to be applied from outside (for a discussion, see Müller, 2019). However, despite its imperfections it is better than postcommunist, in view of the fact that communism was never achieved in the Soviet Union.

ically, focus on insights derived from transnational and decolonial feminism to see which practices could be embraced within the broader academic landscape.

## **Estonian research context**

In Estonia the period since the 1990s has been characterized by a widespread acceptance of neoliberal values, as an antidote to the Soviet past that Estonia has been eager to leave behind (Marling, 2010). This is an extension of its desire to erase the stigma of Easternness. Even when ruling parties have changed, the overall ideology has remained relatively stable. There has been a shift in the 2010s, as the rise of populism, increasing polarization and global instability have reconfigured the political playing field and increased the popularity of far-right populists who have appealed to the precaritized social groups left behind by the success narrative that has primarily benefited the urban elites. Despite this, however, neoliberal values seem to have been internalized by different social groups.

These political emphases have also left their mark on higher education and research. In the race to join Europe, Soviet academic structures were swiftly dismantled in the 2000s and, since joining the EU in 2004, Estonia has assertively integrated its higher education and research systems with those of the EU. Locally, Estonian academic culture is characterized by neoliberal practices like competition, quantifiable results and other elements of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). These quantifiable results are followed in hiring and promotion, as unquestioned signs of academic excellence. Although the majority of faculty members have permanent contracts, they must pass a review every five years in which the amount of competitive research funding, the number of high-impact publications, citation statistics, number of graduated PhD candidates and similar quantifiable outputs are measured (Aavik & Marling, 2022). Increasingly, academic recruitment and promotion also require collaboration with the private sector (technology transfer, startups, etc.). Comparable initiatives to encourage collaboration with the public sector or NGOs have not been launched. The numerical data that guide this audit culture have come to stand in for value-free excellence, without much consideration of their background assumptions (cf. O'Regan & Gray, 2018). The models are based on the natural sciences but have by now been accepted by the social sciences and humanities (SSH) as inevitable (Tönismann, 2022).<sup>3</sup>

The pressure to bring in research funding has made Estonian grant calls extremely competitive: in 2022, 335 applications were submitted, of which 66 were funded (success rate 20% across all grant types). In the humanities the figures were 59 and 7, re-

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3 One example of this is that candidates for postdoctoral scholarships in all fields have to identify their technology readiness levels in the online application form, despite its inapplicability in SSH.

spectively. That is, funding success is noticeably lower, 12% (Laurand, 2022). Because of the difficulty of obtaining local research funding and the challenges in creating collaborations with the private sector, SSH scholars are encouraged to compete for the coveted ERC and Horizon Europe grants, the latter of which are built around European missions (climate resilience, cancer, oceans, climate-neutral cities and soil) that are often far removed from the humanities. Estonian scholars bring in one of the highest levels of research funding per GDP in the EU (Raudvere, 2018). This seeming success that often leaves SSH researchers behind only increases the pressure. As a result, grants are moved away from the core problems in the humanities that require decades of patient research, to provide ancillary analyses for other disciplines. This is not just a matter of academic advancement but of survival of research groups and institutes. Research funding is being used to fill chronic gaps left by limited state funding, as higher education has only in the past two years been able to secure 1% of the national GDP promised already in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

This pressure to compete internationally affects what and how researchers choose to study and what and where they publish. The bibliometric logic discourages publication in Estonian and local journals. This makes producing research that supports social change, including within the academic establishment itself (Martin, 2009), challenging. This also encourages certain epistemic practices, while discouraging others.

## **Transnational feminism and its epistemic practices**

The field of feminist studies has a long history of heated debates on epistemic justice and situated knowledges. The concept of “politics of location” (Rich, 1986) has urged feminist scholars to reflect upon, and take responsibility for, how they know and act within the locations they inhabit, reproduce, and transform. One’s location becomes a place from which to articulate conceptual and analytical concerns (Madhok, 2020).

Closely linked to the politics of location are discussions of transnational feminism, introduced in the early 1990s (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994) to address the challenges that globalization presented to feminists, including the rise of neoliberalism. The impetus for this framework came from the need to tackle issues of internationalism which constructed the world as consisting of separate but equal nation states while keeping the intertwined colonial, imperialist, and capitalist histories unaddressed (Cf. Kulawik & Kravchenko, 2020; Tambe & Thayer, 2021). As an analytical tool transnational feminism has aimed to not only facilitate critical understandings of hegemonic social power structures but also to consolidate alliances across different hegemonies, transcending

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<sup>4</sup> This research and development funding will, however, not go straight to researchers or universities. Some will be given to ministries who will decide on their own allocation priorities and some to private enterprises.

a blind ontologizing of the world into dichotomous large-scale entities such as “developed/developing countries”, “global north/global south” and “east/west”.

However, the transnational feminist framework continues to have its own blind spots. The postsocialist space would be one example (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Koobak, 2019). Transnational feminist theorizing rarely reflects on the interconnectedness of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the changing social conditions of that time (Koobak et al., 2021; Suchland, 2011). This translates into a failure to recognize postsocialist feminism as relevant knowledge. Like postcolonial feminist scholars, postsocialist feminists have called attention to the continued epistemic inequalities within feminist theory in which white middle-class scholars from the Global North have often spoken for and thus subdued the voices of women from the Global South and CEE (Cerwonka, 2008; Grabowska, 2012). Yet the dialogue between postcolonial and postsocialist feminists remains strained within the frame of transnational feminism. Drawing on the calls to explore the complex relationships between postcolonial and postsocialist frameworks (see e.g., Chari & Verdery 2009; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2016), the growing literature on the “uneasy affinities” between postcolonial and postsocialist analytics in relation to feminist theorizing and practice shows that dialogues between the two can shift the established ways of thinking about gender, sexuality, race, migration, diasporas, indigeneity, and disability (Koobak et al., 2021). Dialogues between postcolonial and postsocialist feminisms allow us to build “deep coalitions” (Lugones, 2003) to confront the rise of neoliberalism, nationalist populisms, heteropatriarchy and racial capitalism.

## **The challenges of decolonizing feminism**

One promising avenue that has received considerable attention in feminist research in the past twenty years is decolonial thought, rooted in the South- and Latin-American indigenous traditions. It seeks to develop modes of knowing that are, first, informed by the critique of the legacies of colonialism in a global capitalist system, and second, are distinct from habitual Western thought. While European colonial regimes largely crumbled in the 1960s, power imbalances between the West and the rest remain. Discussions on decoloniality have mostly juxtaposed the Global North and the Global South, yet the decolonial lens can also be used to differentiate between the colonial investments of European countries in the center and the periphery.

The decolonial perspective is invaluable in the context of gender. María Lugones (2010, p. 746) tasks decolonial feminism with “a critique of racialized, colonial, capitalist, heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social world”. The decolonial framework calls our attention to the residual coloniality that governs our

thinking and being. Feminisms, too, have been implicated in colonial racializing practices, as has been shown by scholars like bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Chandra Mohanty. As Navtej K. Purewal and Jennifer Ung Loh argue, “feminist tools developed within the colonality of power will never be able to bring about epistemic change” (Purewal & Ung Loh, 2021, p. 1). Thus, it is important to remain aware that feminism itself is potentially produced by and implicated in perpetuating inequalities in knowledge production.

The mainstreaming of feminism has also led to it being increasingly hijacked by neoliberal discourses that equate gender equality with the freedom to compete in the labor market, with limited attention to continued social inequalities. This has created what has come to be called neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014). The surface similarities between (liberal) feminism’s emphasis on individual self-realization and neoliberal self-responsibilization have made feminist rhetoric co-optable into neoliberal discourse (Marling & Koobak, 2017). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, p. 972) warns about the uses of feminist language which ignore feminist political goals by neutralizing them into “a privatized politics of representation, disconnected from systematic critique and materialist histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy.”

We should maintain the same cautiousness when it comes to the recent success of the decolonial approach. We need to ask whether its genealogy in radical social and intellectual practice is being retained when decolonial thought travels within disciplines. If the call to decolonize knowledge comes from scholars who are tenured in the academic systems of the US and the UK or who ignore writing from indigenous or Global South scholars, does it really disrupt the established knowledge production? We seek to de-center this discussion by placing it in the often-neglected postsocialist CEE.

This critical stance should begin with attention to the specificity of terms and local histories. Decolonization should not be used as a mere metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012) nor should it only emphasize the material nature of land, backgrounding the analysis of slavery and settler colonialism (Garba & Sorentino, 2020). Decolonial analysis delves into the roots of the present social order, by seeking to dismantle the long-term effects of the entangled histories of empires, imperialism, colonial expansionism, slavery and capitalist extractivism, and the attendant gendered, racialized and sexualized practices. In the academic context, decolonial approaches call for replacing Western universalisms with more pluriversal approaches, informed by sensitivity to geopolitical differences (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2009). In contrast to postcolonial approaches, decolonial ones seek a greater degree of distancing from Western epistemic practices and are more committed to political agency (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Knobblock, 2019). The extent to which this is possible is a subject of active debate. From a postcolonial perspective, the hope of recovering the long-suppressed indigenous insights is built on “the illusion that something could have escaped the totalizing colonial remaking of the modern world and its epistemic violence” (Colpani et al., 2022). Yet the efforts to de-naturalize our epistemic habits are vital to critical academic work.

Decolonization is a pluriversal activity, in a dialogue with transnational and intersectional approaches, that requires seeking out perspectives that complicate the existing approaches with different local and embodied differences. Decolonial thought, especially, needs to be (self-)reflexive, bridging “the gaps between the extremes of decolonial academism and decolonial activism” (Tlostanova, 2023a, p. 147). These questions are particularly relevant when we employ decolonial optics to study colonial trajectories, settler colonialism and different indigenous knowledges within Europe (Kuokkanen, 2019; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Knobblock, 2019, p. 293). Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Knobblock (2019, p. 294) stress the need to re-think feminist knowledge with attention to the natural world and the planetary scale. With such awareness there is less of a possibility of assuming that the word “decolonial” can be used as an umbrella term for any anti-racist or anti-colonial work.

Like Intan Paramaditha (2022, p. 34), we suggest that “decolonial feminism be viewed as an experiment: a risky, unfinished project rather than a stable site” in which we can learn, as María Lugones (2010, p. 253) has already proposed, “from other resisters.” Decolonial feminism should not be viewed as a mere step beyond the postcolonial in feminist theorizing (Ramamurthy & Tambe, 2017, p. 510) but as a distinct critical and activist stance. This framing of decolonial feminism, however, does not mean that it necessarily escapes the fate of becoming an empty buzzword in international academic capitalism that excludes thinkers who are unaffiliated with the academic elites of the Global North. This is why we focus on the CEE and its interpretation of decoloniality in a neoliberal academic universe.

## **Travels of decolonial theory in Eastern Europe**

When notions like “decolonial” travel within contemporary academic capitalism they also open up potentials in different sociocultural locations. For instance, while conceding the silencing effect of global hegemonic epistemologies, Maria do Mar Pereira (2014, p. 628) also draws attention to their strategic use in peripheral countries. This question is pertinent in Estonia where the international prestige of gender studies has helped to mainstream them in Estonian academia. The bibliometry-based academic review system has been interested in just the rank of the publication: if research appears in a high-impact academic journal of great international visibility, it is lauded, regardless of its topic. The status of international feminist theory journals has helped to establish such research as “excellent” in the Estonian context. The fact that EU funding schemes include calls that directly address gender inequalities has also encouraged scholars to give attention to gender. The recent EU-wide research funding policy change that required the applicant organizations to present their Gender Equality strategies

pressured all Estonian universities to adopt such documents. This should not be read as a denial of “the huge international power imbalances in knowledge creation” but rather as an invitation to “a more nuanced discussion of the travel of ideas that recognize the agency of local interpreters” (Marling & Koobak, 2017, p. 13).

Local knowledge and interpretations can bring invaluable nuances to the international academic conversation. However, the pressure to publish in high-visibility journals also creates an incentive for treating the currently topical theoretical concepts as buzzwords to gain entry to the prestigious academic fora, instead of taking the riskier path of challenging international orthodoxies. Theories and terms built on ideas of activist practice may lose their political potency in such use. However, once ideas enter the intellectual conversation in some geopolitical location, they also become available elsewhere where local activists can fill these terms with local meanings. In the context of CEE, for example, heightened attention to decoloniality can also make visible the presence of race in the eugenic elements of nation-building projects across CEE (Turda, 2015). As we pointed out earlier, a global turn to decoloniality has also brought renewed attention to Estonia’s colonial legacies.

We have shown how feminist research in postsocialist Estonia was to a certain extent legitimized by academic capitalism. In this article, we ask whether the international prestige of decolonial and transnational feminist interventions can help to disrupt neoliberal academic culture. We, too, are parts of the story of traveling academic theory as our 2014 article advocated for the decolonial approach but at a theoretical level. In it, we expressed the hope that decoloniality has the potential to look beyond the postsocialist legacy and to examine the complex layering of often racialized colonial presences and their effects. We proposed to focus on “co-presences, interactions and interlocking understandings and practices rather than divisive dichotomies” (Koobak & Marling, 2014, pp. 339–340). For us, decoloniality offered a basis for a more egalitarian, plural and located dialogue that allows us to leave behind the old progress narratives in which the East will never catch up with the West.

Since our first article on the topic, the Estonian Research Database that gathers all research outputs in Estonia (yet another sign of its academic audit culture) includes nine publications with the word “decolonial” in their titles or as a keyword (the number of articles containing the keyword “feminism” is 123). The articles come from feminist scholars in international relations, but also other researchers in anthropology, human geography, literature, and political science. Thus, the term “decolonial” has started to move into a broad academic conversation in Estonia. None of these articles use the notion as an empty buzzword, as they are attentive to activism (e.g. Poopuu, 2022) and raise critical questions about the role of, for example, indigenous subjectivities within decolonial discourses. Many of these articles create thoughtful parallels with other countries for analyzing the colonality of power inherent in nation-building and Europeanization projects.



The Estonian National Corpus of 2021, for comparison, contains 26 uses of the word “decolonial”. The references come not just from academic contexts, but also from the cultural press (both mainstream and alternative). (In the 2019 version of the National Corpus, the number of references is 9, with the first example from 2017). The corpus also reveals that the word co-occurs with the words anti-racist, feminist, postcolonial and critical. This suggests that in Estonian usage, the notion is still largely being used by informed scholars and activists and continues to have a political edge.

It is to be expected that as they travel, ideas are transformed to fit the local critical needs. In Estonia, the decolonial analytic has been most productively used in the analyses of the colonial aspect of the Soviet occupation (Annus, 2018). This optic has added important layers to local history, but also to a global understanding of the colonialist dimension of Soviet power. This angle can be used productively across CEE and within the Soviet sphere of influence, especially when coupled with critical perspectives on nationalism and the role of the “colonial amnesia of European historiography” (Bjelić, 2022).

The next logical step for Estonian scholars is to apply the decolonial analytic to late 19th century and interwar nation-building efforts and the ways in which they employed the language of Europeanization and modernization. The first critical interventions have come from the field of historiography: Kaljundi and Velmet (2020) have called attention to the extent to which the nation, alongside race and class, has been under-analyzed in Estonia. They also show the work done on this range of questions within memory studies and art history and the ways in which this research has shed light on various practices of domestication. The fact that the pioneering decolonial practice can also generate political backlashes has been shown within art and curating (Koobak & Tali, 2023).

Another critical terrain is the investigation of the various processes of globalization, Europeanization and neoliberalization that Estonian society has undergone since the 1990s. The narratives created in the process require critical deconstruction, to make visible the coloniality behind neoliberal practices. Some critical analyses of neoliberalization have emerged, including from the perspective of gender (e.g., Marling & Koobak, 2017; Saar & Aavik, 2022). We need to extend this analytic to how these narratives are imbued with a colonial logic and how they interact with a variety of equally transnational populist narratives (Scheiring, 2021). Although populists have been effective in challenging the neoliberal hegemony in CEE, they have been reluctant to go beyond the critique of global economic elites. The study of the intersection of populism and (settler) colonialism needs to be expanded to cover contemporary politics in CEE, including its weaponization of gender and sexuality (e.g. Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

It is vital to ask whether this activist decolonial awareness can help disrupt the neoliberal academic culture. In the following, we propose three possible avenues of academic activism informed by decolonial and transnational feminist practice.

## **Decolonial/feminist practices of resistance when resistance seems futile**

Decolonial thinkers often talk about the impossibility of decolonizing the university. Universities are built on colonial traditions and thus are resistant to change. The system resists by “incorporating critique nominally and adopting the appearance of sympathy, thereby circumventing a decolonial confrontation” (Mayorga et al., 2019, p. 95). This is why it can be called “vigilant in its negligence” (Moten & Harney, 2004, p. 106). A decolonial alternative would prioritize indigenous self-determination – land and community, as opposed to the individualism of neoliberalism – and stress relationality. This model, however, is not immediately practicable within contemporary research universities, especially during the global conservative and populist war on science. We need to think of ways of adapting the existing universities in order to recognize the limitations of neoliberal academic culture and to create spaces for critical awareness that help to build sustainable communities and egalitarian societies.

The first step is to tell academic stories differently. Andrea Petö (2023, p. 22) discusses today’s “grim storytelling” which focuses “on decline, suffering, collapse, and conflict”. She suggests that at the time when it seems that nothing can be done, we need “better stories” (Georgis, 2013) “that generate an understanding of human potentiality, creativity, resilience, interconnectedness and shared vulnerability” (Petö, 2023, p. 22). Better stories allow us not to get locked into the fatalist belief that there is no alternative to the status quo. Thus, we need to devise academic research that does not focus on instrumental goals and competition but collaboration and care. This approach would take a long-term view, discouraged in today’s short-term project-based thinking, and build solidarities across disciplines. Such collaborative long-term projects are vital to respond to the great societal challenges such as climate crisis and polarization.

The second option is to encourage slow scholarship to challenge the anxious project-based thinking in which researchers have to rush to publish to secure funding in the next application rounds. This fast science, as Isabelle Stengers (2018) stresses, resembles fast food: fast to prepare but of questionable value. It also discourages inquiry into complex social issues, for example, the kinds of colonial layering that we can see in the Estonian past and present. The very normativity of fast competitive research itself needs to be placed under critical decolonial scrutiny, for it is tacitly racialized and gendered. This cannot be untangled by one research group within a five-year project but requires an interdisciplinary critical dialogue that may take decades. Indeed, the loudest form of resistance to what Sharma (2014) has called “power-chronography” might be to simply slow down. This is risky for people in precarious positions, but established scholars in SSH need to push for the recognition of slow science to reduce the amount of opportunistic fast scholarship. Drawing here from the feminist ethics of

care (Mountz et al., 2015) can be invaluable for building a university where all members can flourish.

The third intervention involves paying attention to the ways in which we write. Academic writing itself often carries traces of neoliberal academic culture (Bozalek, 2017). Discussing Black embodied knowledge as irreducible to commodifiable knowledge categories because it was fought with flesh and blood, Katherine McKittrick (2021, p. 35) asks us to become sensitive to our disciplinary constraints and proposes “methodology as an act of disobedience and rebellion”. This type of disobedient relationality is practiced by different decolonial and transnational feminist scholars (Lykke et al., 2023) who invite us to use “theory in the flesh” in which “the physical realities of our lives – our skin colour, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23).

We need other modes of engagement than “derelational short-term tactical thinking aimed at maintaining the status quo” (Tlostanova, 2023b, pp. 186–187) to respond to the major global crises we face. Tlostanova (2023b, pp. 7–8) stresses that in “the age of unsettlement” academic work also needs to become unsettled, if we want to “understand the present and imagine the future”. For her, the solution lies in greater reliance on artistic practices, as they allow us to grasp the complexity, interconnectedness and relationality of the world. This broader range of practices of “thinkering” and worlding can give us an opportunity for avoiding the existing blind spots and stumbling blocks. Drawing on Tlostanova, we propose that university review systems embrace imaginative forms of academic writing, already exemplified in numerous influential works (e.g., Pandian & McLean, 2017; Stewart, 2007). By writing differently, we can think differently. There should also be more space in academic evaluation for research-creation that brings together research and artistic presentation, to open research up to the general public and to make it not just understood but felt (Truman, 2021).

These interventions will not immediately change the system, but they may encourage us to break our epistemic habits and look critically at the university in its existing form in order to start challenging its colonial and neoliberal status quo and to carve out spaces within to tell better stories and to build stronger communities, inside and outside of academia.

## **Conclusion**

For such creative interventions to appear, we need to assert the importance of the politics of location in doing academic analyses and to not merely copy theoretical assumptions from other contexts. While coloniality of power is experienced across the globe, it is manifested through a complex mesh of different colonial actors and thus

requires attention at a localized level. This can be done in a manner that is informed about the travel of epistemic practices and capable of establishing itself in contemporary academic capitalism without losing its critical acumen. It also requires dialogues between scholars from the margins. We have been too eager to explain ourselves to the epistemic centers of today's academia, but perhaps instead we need to talk more to our colleagues in Poland, Czechia or Ukraine. These local East-East dialogues allow us to hone our critical perspectives and to exchange proposals for initiating academic change.

The importance of viewing the language of decolonizing as a point of departure and not as an arrival (Paramaditha, 2022, p. 31) is crucial in the context of broader academic knowledge production in CEE as well. Decolonizing as an orientation and not as a fixed method to dismantle coloniality allows us to move to a more constructive place that is aware of the local and global processes that create unequal planes in which cross-cultural coalitions and practices of solidarity should take place. This, then, is the true challenge of decolonial research: to not just create incisive analyses that can be published in internationally visible high-impact journals but to translate them into a local political activist practice. We also need to tell our better stories across different discursive platforms: in the form of academic articles, short stories, poems, exhibitions, blog posts, to imagine the world differently and to become the engines for creating this difference.

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### Neoliberalizacja nauki w Estonii z perspektywy feminizmu transnarodowego i zdekolonizowanego

**Abstrakt:** Od lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku Estonię cechuje akceptacja wartości neoliberalnych jako re-medium na relikty radzieckiej przeszłości. Praktyki neoliberalne, takie jak kwantyfikacja i orientacja na rynek, przeniknęły do większości sfer życia społecznego, w tym do świata nauki. Jednocześnie widoczny jest niemal zupełny brak krytycznego namysłu nad nierównościami epistemicznymi, jakie taki model akademii generuje w półperyferyjnym państwie, jakim jest Estonia. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą umiejscowienia neoliberalizacji nauki w szerszym kontekście praktyk kolonialnych w ramach globalnej produkcji wiedzy, stanowi zatem kontynuację poprzednich prac autorek na temat słabości transnarodowego feminizmu oraz punktów stycznych feminizmów i neoliberalizmu. Poszerzając obserwacje na temat feminizmu transnarodowego i zdekolonizowanego, proponują trzy formy interweniowania w neoliberalną kulturę akademicką: opowiadanie lepszych historii, uprawianie nauki „powolnej” (slow) celem dostrzeżenia złożoności relacji kolonialnych oraz wykorzystanie praktyk pisanie kreatywnego.

**Wyrażenia kluczowe:** neokolonializm; transnarodowy feminizm; feminizm zdekolonizowany; nauka w Estonii



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